

# **INTERNET SHOULD NOT BECOME TOOL OF REPRESSION, LAWMAKER SAYS**

By  
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American people are deeply troubled to see U.S. technology and know-how used by repressive regimes in China and elsewhere in the world to cruelly exploit and abuse the citizens of those countries. While the Internet has opened up commercial opportunities and provided people all over the world with access to vast amounts of information, in China it has also become a malicious tool -- a cyber-sledgehammer of repression in the hands of the government.

When Internet use started to become widespread in China, brave citizens took advantage of this new method of communication to spread information by email about human-rights abuses issues and government corruption. The Chinese government responded with an immediate crackdown. To date, an estimated 49 cyber-dissidents and 32 journalists have been imprisoned merely for using the Internet to spread information critical of the Chinese government.

I was recently on a news program talking about Google and China and was asked, "Should businesses be tasked with promoting democracy around the globe?" My response is that we are asking the wrong question. We ought to be asking whether businesses should help repressive dictatorships by partnering with, and providing tools to, a corrupt and cruel secret police, and by cooperating with laws that violate basic human rights.

In the case of China, there's clear evidence that U.S. technology companies are collaborating with a brutally oppressive regime in decapitating the voice of its dissidents. In 2005, Yahoo's cooperation with Chinese secret police led to the imprisonment of cyber-dissident Shi Tao. This was not the first time something like this had happened. Yahoo also handed over information to Chinese authorities on another of its users, Li Zhi -- who was later sentenced to

eight years in prison for "inciting subversion." His only "crime" was to use online discussion groups and articles to criticize official corruption.

By using a combination of technology and an estimated force of 30,000 cyber-police to monitor, filter, and block critical content the Chinese government prevents its people from having access to uncensored information on political and human-rights topics. They only see what Big Brother allows them to see. Women and men are going to the gulag and being tortured as a direct result of information handed over to Chinese officials. These are not victimless crimes. We must stand with the oppressed, not the oppressors.

On February 15, as chairman of the committee in the U.S. House of Representatives that oversees global human rights and international operations, I led a hearing to examine this problem. The hearing, which lasted more than seven hours, raised more questions than it answered. I was surprised when Yahoo's witness wouldn't reveal how often or under what circumstances the company provides private information about its customers to the secret police and whether any effort is made to ascertain what actions are taken by police based on this information. Yahoo didn't even seem to be curious whether any of the many journalists and other cyber-activists incarcerated in the laogai (Chinese prison camps) are there on account of information the company provided to the dictatorship.

Similarly, Cisco's witness failed to provide any real insight as to how Cisco's incredible technology is being used by Chinese police thugs to find, capture, convict, jail and torture both religious believers and human-rights advocates. My committee then heard from Harry Wu, a 19-year survivor of the laogai, who told us that Cisco was training the secret police in how to use its technology to identify dissidents -- so making it even harder for those who criticize the Chinese government to evade capture.

I have been a pro-business member of the U.S. Congress for 25 years and strongly believe that Internet companies like Google, Yahoo, Cisco and Microsoft attract some of the best and brightest minds. They have developed cutting-edge technology. But it is technology that should be used to encourage and empower the oppressed and help those yearning for freedom to make their voices heard -- instead of serving as a tool of repression.

Therefore I have introduced the Global Online Freedom Act of 2006, in response to requests from several American information-technology companies that the U.S. government actively protect a free Internet and ensure that American companies operating in repressive

regimes have the support of their government as they strive to respect the universal rights of freedom of speech and press. This act establishes U.S. policy regarding the free flow of information on the Internet, minimum corporate standards, and the right of redress for individuals who are persecuted by repressive regimes in violation of this act.

The act would require the U.S. president to annually designate any nation whose government has systematically restricted Internet freedom during the previous year as an "Internet-Restricting Country," and establish an office of Global Internet Freedom within the U.S. State Department to report to Congress on its assessment on the state of the freedom of electronic information in every foreign country.

In addition, my bill would ensure that U.S. businesses are not put in the difficult position of complying with local laws, or forced to turn over personal information on their account users. It would achieve this by preventing companies from hosting email servers or search engines within Internet-Restricting Countries, or establishing any kind of presence in such countries that would make it liable to political censorship and require it to hand over personal information on its users.

We are at a point where leading U.S. companies like Google, Yahoo, Cisco and Microsoft have compromised both the integrity of their product and their duties as responsible corporate citizens in order to compete in the world's largest market. The ability to communicate openly is the key to unlock the doors to freedom for those who cannot feel its touch, and IT companies can help to provide that. As Americans, we need to empower those who seek the path of democracy, not stifle their ability to speak out.

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